

A Preliminary Archaeological Survey of the Spencer Marsh House, Walker County, Georgia

By

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Introduction

In April, 2004, Erin May of Preservation Studio South contacted the author concerning an architectural assessment and rehabilitation of the historic Spencer Marsh House in Lafayette, Walker County, Georgia. As part of their project, Ms. May and lead architect Andy Smith were interested in establishing the archaeological context of the surrounding yard at this site, and they requested input from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Institute of Archaeology. After visiting the site, it was decided that the UTC Archaeological Field School would conduct a preliminary survey of a portion of the yard during the first week of May. Fieldwork occurred on May 5 and 6, 2004, with artifact analysis and report preparation occurring at the UTC Institute of Archeology Laboratory on May 7 and 8 and June 4, 5 and 6. Eight students under the direction of Dr. Nicholas Honerkamp participated in the fieldwork.

The Spencer Marsh House, located in the center of downtown Lafayette at 308 Main Street, is owned by the Walker County Historical Society. The Civil War Sites Assessment for Walker County, Georgia states that the house was built in 1836 by Spencer Marsh. According to the 1850 US Slave Schedule for Walker County, Marsh owned 12 slaves valued at \$16,000; the 1860 census enumerates 8 slaves (valued at \$15,000) who were housed in two cabins on the Marsh property. Descendents of some of these slaves still reside in the area (Foster 2003). Spencer Marsh was a prominent merchant in Lafayette and served as a justice of the Inferior Court of Walker County for several years. He served briefly as a state senator, was active in church affairs, and was appointed by the Tennessee General Assembly as a trustee of the Chattooga Academy (the adjacent John B. Gordon Hall, also built in 1836) and the Lafayette Female Academy. With two other businessmen he organized the first cotton mill in the region, which began production in 1847. Known as the Trion Factory, it employed 45 workers, survived the Civil War, and eventually burned down in 1875, with Marsh still owning half of it, along with a major financial stake in a rail line and telegraph company that served it. In his heyday just prior to the economic and social disruptions of the Civil War, Marsh was listed as the wealthiest individual in Walker County, with the 1860 census showing his real estate valued at \$35,000 and his personal estate at \$73,000. His substantial plantation house with its large front porch, balcony, and stately columns was an overt reflection of his high-status position.

In September of 1863, Confederate General Braxton Bragg used the adjacent Gordon Hall as his headquarters, according to the Civil War Assessment. Lafayette saw some action during 1864, when Federal forces briefly occupied the house and other downtown buildings. Thus, in addition to domestic artifacts and features, military items associated with the Civil War could have been deposited in the yard area of the Marsh House, but no specific archaeological “targets” were generated from the documentary background.

Prior to the survey some outbuildings were noted on Sanborn Insurance maps for the Marsh property, although most were apparently located in what is now thick secondary growth north and east of the house; only the remains of a reconstructed “well house” on the edge of the cleared yard was still extant.

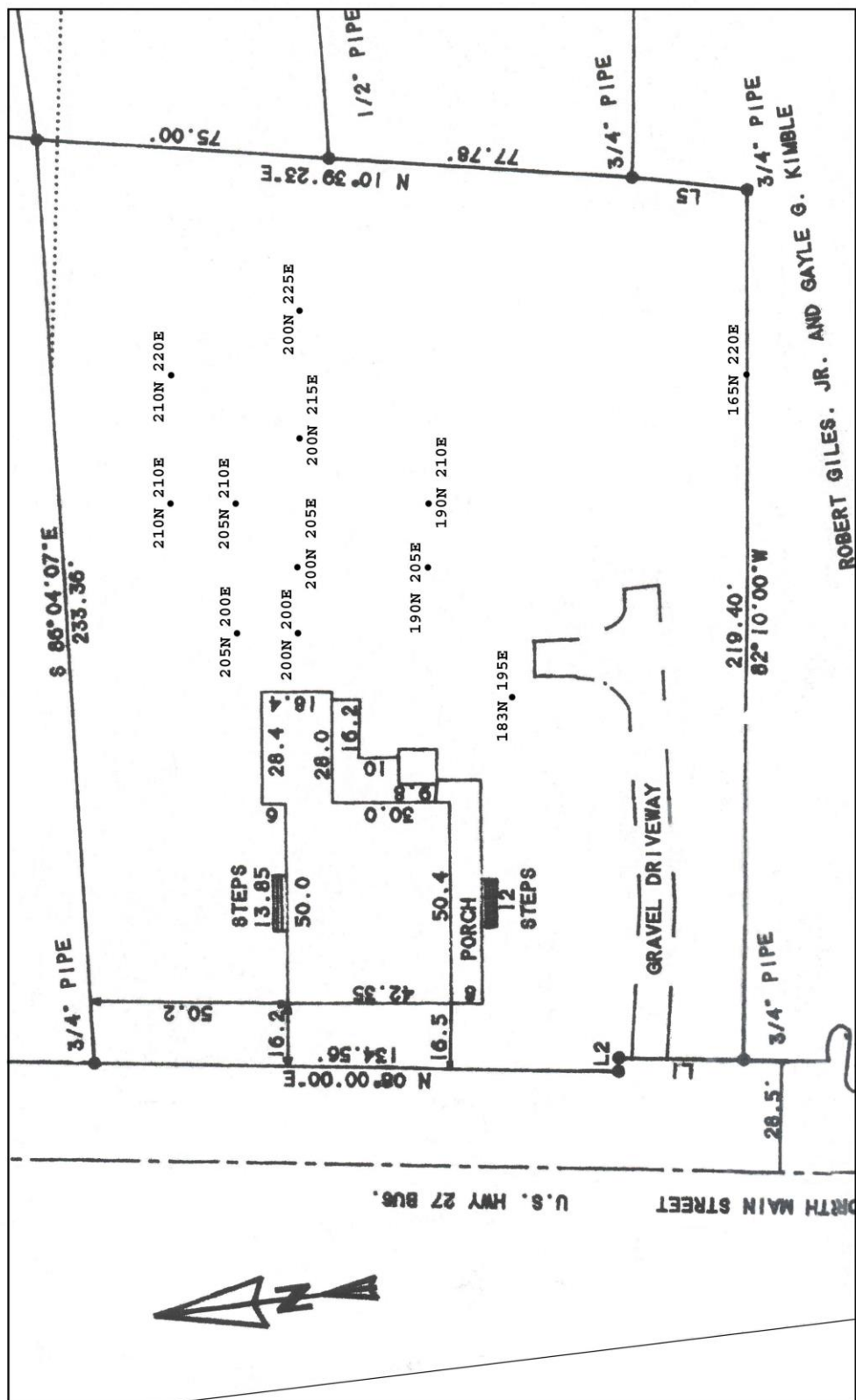


Figure 1. Marsh House Footprint and Survey Unit Locations.

Fieldwork

Due to the limited amount of time devoted to this project and the absence of specific document-generated subsurface features to investigate, it was decided to conduct a preliminary survey in part of the yard associated with the house. Accordingly, a grid was established over much of the site and 12 survey units measuring $1/2 \text{ m}^2$ were excavated to sterile; Figure 1 illustrates the layout of the test pits. Fill from each unit was screened through $1/4''$ mesh to enhance artifact recovery (Figure 2). The stratigraphy for each unit was recorded in narrative field notes, and digital photographs were taken of features and of the fieldwork process.



Figure 2. Fieldwork at the Marsh Site. UTC Field School students Jonathan Waller, Brita Howard, and Supervisor Brooke Persons screen a survey pit in the side yard of the Marsh House.

The grid point used to designate each pit was located in the SW corner of each unit, and each pit was offset approximately 5 – 10 cm north and east of this point. The stratigraphy at the site was fairly consistent throughout, consisting of a dark brown artifact-bearing zone of sandy loam over a sterile horizon of tan sandy clay. Although several centimeters of this underlying zone was screened in the initial units, it was found to be devoid of artifacts. Hence, Zone 2 was considered to be culturally sterile and excavation ceased once this zone was reached in the subsequent tests. The only notable exception to this stratigraphic consistency was in 183N 195E. Unlike all the other tests, this unit was not located on a grid multiple of 5 meters in order to place it in the front yard area south of the house. In this location, Zone 1 consisted of tan/gray/orange mottled sandy clay to 13cm below surface, with the upper 3cm of duff and humus. The few artifacts that were

recovered were associated with these upper levels. Zone 2 was a sterile brown sandy loam extending to an unknown depth. This may represent the edge of a distinct natural soil association, or it may be a result of some kind of human land use modification.

In all of the units, particularly 210N 210E and 200N 215E, a thick deposit of coal and coal clinker fragments was noted. In fact, these artifacts were so ubiquitous at the site that only a small opportunistic sample was retained. As with many households that were extant during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Marsh home was heated with coal, and the by-products of coal storage and combustion were deposited in the yard area.

A single subsurface feature was found during the project: in the southeast corner of 210N 190E, a possible posthole was uncovered (Figure 3). Unfortunately, this feature was not recognized until approximately half of it was removed as part of what was thought to be a “deep” Zone 1. This roughly 14 cm diameter area of dark fill was reamed to approximately 50 cm below surface, but the true bottom of the feature was obscured by an underlying root disturbance. Only a few small fragments of undiagnostic brick and coal clinker were recovered from the posthole fill.



Figure 3. Possible posthole in southeast corner of 210N 190E.

Artifact Assemblages

Artifacts discovered during the survey can be classified into distinct functional categories. Ceramics provide the most sensitive temporal indicators; dates of manufacture have been taken primarily from South (1977), Price (1979), Honerkamp et al. (1982), Noel Hume (1974), Greer 1970, and Bartovics (1981). A total of 148 sherds were recovered (including a single sherd of porcelain included in the overall site surface collection, FS1). The most common types in the assemblage consisted of plain (n=60) and decorated whitewares (n=16); see Figure 4 and Table 1 for a summary of ceramics by test units. Plain whiteware (including ironstone, which is almost indistinguishable from whiteware) was manufactured in a variety of vessel forms from 1813 into the 20th century; it is omnipresent on 19th century sites. Most of the sherds in the Marsh House assemblage are from plates. Blue shell edged and transfer printed whiteware types have a more limited temporal distribution (1826-1880 and 1826-1875, respectively). A surprisingly large number of porcelain sherds (n=27) were found, but this type is extremely difficult to date: 10 are apparently modern in origin, while the remainder are indeterminate as to date of manufacture. All of the sherds were quite small, and appear to represent cups, saucers, or plates, which is not unexpected for this type of refined ceramics.

While not numerous, the two sherds of alkaline glazed stoneware are a 19th century utilitarian folk pottery that is sometimes associated with slave cabins. Although it cannot be considered to be a slave-only ceramic type, the presence of this pottery is at least intriguing, especially since slave residences are recorded for this site. Also classified as utilitarian types, 17 sherds of gray or brown salt glazed stoneware were recovered, 12 exhibiting interior Albany slip, and all appear to be from large crocks or jugs. Both refined and utilitarian ceramic examples are illustrated in Figure 5. Another common utilitarian ware at antebellum sites consists of a single sherd of lead glazed earthenware. The 12 sherds of unglazed flowerpot are believed to be modern.

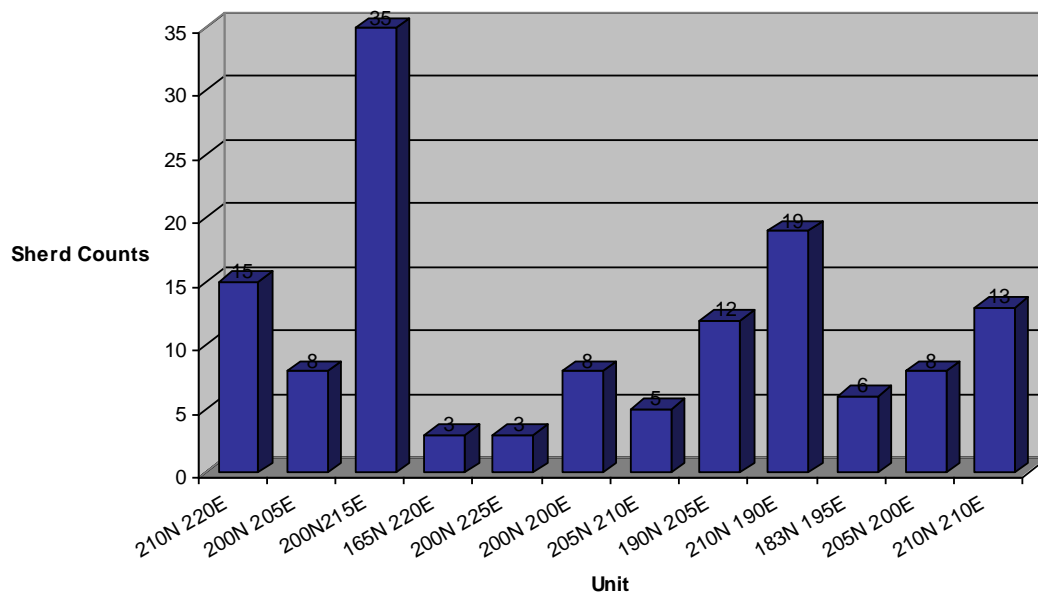


Figure 4. Ceramic Frequencies, by Survey Unit. (Excludes FS 1 and flowerpot fragments.)

Ceramic Type	210N 220E	200N 205E	200N 215E	165N 220E	200N 225E	200N 200E	205N 210E	190N 205E	190N 210E	183N 195E	205N 200E	210N 210E	Totals
Unglazed flowerpot	11							1					12
Lead glazed earthenware					1								1
Plain whiteware	7	2	17	2		7		8	14	1	2		60
Blue edged whiteware	1		1							1			3
Transfer print whiteware	3	1	1	1			2				3	2	13
Plain yellowware							1						1
Miscellaneous refined			1			1							2
Albany slip stoneware			3									9	12
Gray salt glazed stoneware	1							1		1	2		5
Alkaline glazed stoneware		1			1								2
Modern porcelain	3							3		3	1		10
Plain porcelain		4	12		1		2		5			2	26
Totals	26	8	35	3	3	8	5	13	19	6	8	13	147

Table 1. Ceramic Frequencies, by Survey Unit.

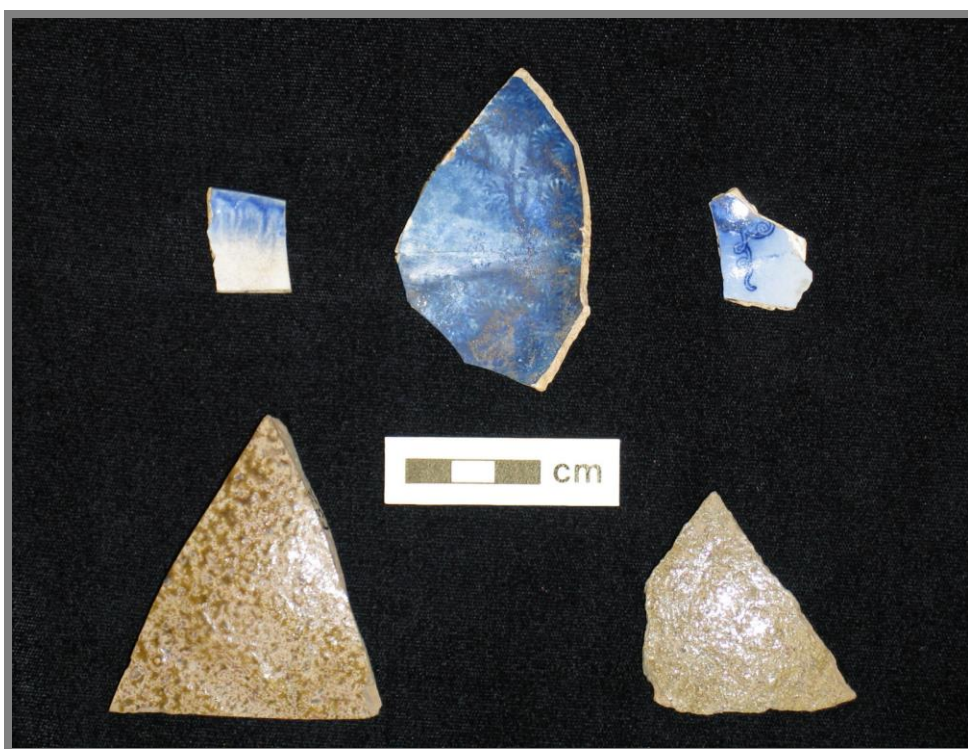


Figure 5. Selected Marsh House Ceramic Artifacts. Top, left to right: blue shell edged whiteware; blue transfer printed whiteware; “flowing blue” transfer printed whiteware. Bottom, left to right: brown salt glazed stoneware; alkaline glazed stoneware.

The 168 fragments of glass that were found were generally undiagnostic, with a couple of exceptions. A partial clear glass goblet base was recovered from 210N 220E, and is illustrated in Figure 6; it may date to the Spencer Marsh occupation. The same can be said for two fragments of patinated window glass, and a possible 19th century association can be attributed to the 30 round-sectioned clear glass fragments that were patinated. As expected, most of the 93 round sectioned fragments, patinated or not, represent bottle glass, with the goblet base being the obvious exception. The majority of glass fragments in the collection are probably of modern origin, including the 44 fragments of unpatinated clear flat (window) glass. Also illustrated in Figure 6 is a flint prehistoric bifacial scraper. In addition to this Native American tool, the survey generated a single fragment of flint debitage, probably a by-product of tool manufacture. The temporal position of these generalized artifacts is impossible to determine.

Architectural artifacts are represented by the 174 nails found at the site. Of these, the majority (n=54) were so badly oxidized that their shape in cross section could not be reliably identified, while 9 were determined to be wire nails, which began to be commonly used in the 1880s (Adams 2002). Two units contained significant numbers of square sectioned nails: 200N 215E (n=25) and 210N 210E (n=46). The former is located 20 m due east of the Marsh house kitchen, while the latter is north and east of the kitchen. These areas appear to be refuse disposal locations, based on the high number of artifacts of various types recovered from the units (see Figure 4 and Table 1). Distribution of bone artifacts was also localized to the north and east of the kitchen, with over 70% of the 35 fragments found occurring in just two units, 205N 210E and 210N 220E. This indicates purposeful disposal of these odoriferous artifacts compared to other artifact types. Several of the fragments were identified to the species level as *Sus scrofa* (pig).



Figure 6. Clear Glass Goblet Base and Bifacial Flint Scraper.

Over 600 fragments of coal and coal clinker were collected during the fieldwork; every single survey unit contained some of this material. As mentioned earlier, the use of coal for heating homes was common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in this area, and these artifacts directly reflect it. Two units, 210N 210E and 200N 215E, contained more coal/coal clinker than dirt, and are believed to be designated areas for disposal of these combustion by-products. Similarly, over 200 brick or mortar fragments were also collected, with most associated with the mid-yard. The presence of brick chimneys and foundation elements in the main house, including a possible brick basement floor under the kitchen of the main, is the most likely source for these artifacts. Conspicuous by its absence were any military artifacts that might be associated with the Union occupation of the house during the Civil War.

Conclusions

This brief survey at the Marsh House produced scant tangible remains that could be directly associated with the original Spencer Marsh occupation at the site. This is most likely a result of the small sample derived from the yard area. On the other hand, the fieldwork established that an intact archaeological record does exist at the site, and that it includes both domestic artifacts and subsurface features. Information concerning food preparation and serving is available from the Marsh House yard area, along with data concerning “big house” dietary practices, refuse disposal patterns, and possibly slave lifestyles. To generate this information, an intensive and sustained period of archaeological fieldwork will be required.

While much of what recovered post-dates the Spencer Marsh occupancy, two flint artifacts indicate the earlier presence of prehistoric inhabitants in the area. Based on the survey results, the possibility that a significant prehistoric site underlies the historic horizon is remote at best. While Marsh is reputed to have interacted with Cherokee Indians, the artifacts from this site are almost certainly from an earlier though indeterminate period of time.

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